

"MY BEDSTEAD CONSISTED OF A BOARD WIDE ENOUGH TO SLEEP ON"

Francis Henderson was 19 when he managed to escape from a slave plantation outside of Washington, D.C., in 1841. Here, he describes conditions on his plantation.

Our houses were but log huts- - the tops partly open- - ground floor- - rain would come through. My aunt was quite an old woman, and had been sick several years; in rains I have seen her moving from one part of the house to the other, and rolling her bedclothes about to try to keep dry- - everything would be dirty and muddy. I lived in the house with my aunt. My bed and bedstead consisted of a board wide enough to sleep on- - one end on a stool, the other placed near the fire. My pillow consisted of my jacket- - my covering was whatever I could get. My bedtick was the board itself. And this was the way the single men slept- - but we were comfortable in this way of sleeping, being used to it. I only remember having but one blanket from my owners up to the age of nineteen, when I ran away.

Our allowance was given weekly- - a peck of sifted corn meal, a dozen and a half herrings, two and a half pounds of pork. Some of the boys would eat this up in three days- - then they had to steal, or they could not perform their daily tasks. They would visit the hog- pen, sheep- pen, and granaries. I do not remember one slave but who stole some things- - they were driven to it as a matter of necessity. I myself did this- - many a time have I, with others, run among the stumps in chase of a sheep, that we might have something to eat....In regard to cooking, sometimes many have to cook at one fire, and before all could get to the fire to bake hoe cakes, the overseer's horn would sound: then they must go at any rate. Many a time I have gone along eating a piece of bread and meat, or herring broiled on the coals- - I never sat down at a table to eat except at harvest time, all the time I was a slave. In harvest time, the cooking is done at the great house, as the hands they have are wanted in the field. This was more like people, and we liked it, for we sat down then at meals. In the summer we had one pair of linen trousers given us- - nothing else; every fall, one pair of woolen pantaloons, one woolen jacket, and two cotton shirts.

My master had four sons in his family. They all left except one, who remained to be a driver. He would often come to the field and accuse the slave of having taken so and so. If we denied it, he would whip the grown- up ones to make them own it. Many a time, when we didn't know he was anywhere around, he would be in the woods watching us- - first thing we would know, he would be sitting on the fence looking down upon us, and if any had been idle, the young master would visit him with blows. I have known him to kick my aunt, an old woman who had raised the nursed him, and I have seen him punish my sisters awfully with hickories from the woods.

The slaves are watched by the patrols, who ride about to try to catch them off the quarters, especially at the house of a free person of color. I have known the slaves to stretch clothes lines across the street, high enough to let the horse pass, but not the rider; then the boys would run, and the patrols in full chase would be thrown off by running against the lines. The patrols are poor white men, who live by plundering and stealing, getting rewards for runaways, and setting up little shops on the public roads. They will take whatever the slaves steal, paying in money, whiskey, or whatever the slaves want. They take pigs, sheep, wheat, corn- - any thing that's raised they encourage the slaves to steal: these they take to market next day. It's all speculation- - all a matter of self- interest, and when the slaves run away, these same traders catch them if they can, to get the

"THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS REST"

Solomon Northrup was a free black who was kidnapped in New York and sold into slavery for twelve years. He was finally returned to freedom through the efforts of New York's governor. In the following selection he describes how cotton was raised on his Louisiana plantation.

The hands are required to be in the cotton field as soon as it is light in the morning, and, with the exception of ten or fifteen minutes, which is given them at noon to swallow their allowance of cold bacon, they are not permitted to be a moment idle until it is too dark to see, and when the moon is full, they often times labor till the middle of the night. They do not dare to stop even at dinner time, nor return to the quarters, however late it be, until the order to halt is given by the driver.

The day's work over in the field, the baskets are "toted," or in other words, carried to the gin-house, where the cotton is weighed. No matter how fatigued and weary he may be - no matter how much he longs for sleep and rest - a slave never approaches the gin-house with his basket of cotton but with fear. If it falls short in weight - if he has not performed the full task appointed him, he knows that he must suffer. And if he has exceeded it by ten or twenty pounds, in all probability his master will measure the next day's task accordingly. So, whether he has too little or too much, his approach to the gin-house is always with fear and trembling. Most frequently they have too little, and therefore it is they are not anxious to leave the field. After weighing, follow the whippings; and then the baskets are carried to the cotton house, and their contents stored away like hay, all hands being sent in to tramp it down. If the cotton is not dry, instead of taking it to the gin-house at once, it is laid upon platforms, two feet high, and some three times as wide, covered with boards or plank, with narrow walks running between them.

This done, the labor of the day is not yet ended, by any means. Each one must then attend to his respective chores. One feeds the mules, another the swine - another cuts the wood, and so forth; besides, the packing is all done by candle light. Finally, at a late hour, they reach the quarters, sleepy and overcome with the long day's toil. Then a fire must be kindled in the cabin, the corn ground in the small hand-mill, and supper, and dinner for the next day in the field, prepared. All that is allowed them is corn and bacon, which is given out at the corncrib and smoke-house every Sunday morning. Each one receives, as his weekly allowance, three and a half pounds of bacon, and corn enough to make a peck of meal. That is all - no tea, coffee, sugar, and with the exception of a very scanty sprinkling now and then, no salt....

An hour before day light the horn is blown. Then the slaves arouse, prepare their breakfast, fill a gourd with water, in another deposit their dinner of cold bacon and corn cake, and hurry to the field again. It is an offense invariably followed by a flogging, to be found at the quarters after daybreak. Then the fears and labors of another day begin; and until its close there is no such thing as rest....

In the month of January, generally, the fourth and last picking is completed. Then commences the harvesting of corn....Ploughing, planting, picking cotton, gathering the corn, and pulling and burning stalks, occupies the whole of the four seasons of the year. Drawing and cutting wood, pressing cotton fattening and killing hogs are but incidental labors.

Source: Twelve Years a Slave: Narrative of Solomon Northrup (Auburn, N.Y., 1853).

THE SLAVES ARE PUT IN STALLS LIKE...CATTLE"

James Martin, born on a Virginia plantation in 1847, was 90 years old when he was interviewed by the Works Progress Administration in 1937. After the Civil War he moved to Texas, where he served in the 9th U.S. Cavalry and later worked as a cowboy. Here, he describes a slave auction.

The slaves are put in stalls like the pens they use for cattle- - a man and his wife with a child on each arm. And there's a curtain, sometimes just a sheet over the front of the stall, so the bidders can't see the "stock" too soon. The overseer's standin' just outside with a big black snake whip and a pepperbox pistol in his belt. Across the square a little piece, there's a big platform with steps leadin' to it.

Then, they pulls up the curtain, and the bidders is crowdin' around. Them in back can't see, sot he overseer drives the slaves out to the platform, and he tells the ages of the slaves and what they can do. They have white gloves there, and one of the bidders takes a pair of globes and rubs his fingers over a man's teeth, and he says to the overseer, "You call this buck twenty years old? Why there's cut worms in his teeth. He's forty years old, if he's a day." So they knock this buck down for a thousand dollars. They calls the men "bucks" and the women "wenches."

When the slaves is on the platform- - what they calls the "block"- - the overseer yells, "Tom or Jason, show the bidders how you walk." Then, the slave steps across the platform, and the biddin' starts.

At these slave auctions, the overseer yells, "Say, you bucks and wenches, get in your hole. Come out here." Then, he makes 'em hop, he makes 'em trot, he makes 'em jump. "How much," he yells, "for this buck? A thousand? Eleven hundred? Twelve hundred dollars? Then the bidders makes offers accordin' to size and build.

Source: George P. Rawick, ed., The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography (Westport, Conn., 1972), Texas Narr., Vol.5, 62- 65.

"WE LODGED IN LOG HUTS"

Josiah Henson spent thirty years on a plantation in Montgomery County, Maryland before he escaped slavery and became a Methodist preacher, abolitionist, lecturer, and founder of a cooperative colony of former slaves in Canada. His memoirs, published in 1849, provided Harriet Beecher Stowe with her model of Uncle Tom.

My earliest employments were, to carry buckets of water to the men at work, and to hold a horse- plough, used for weeding between the rows of corn. As I grew older and taller, I was entrusted with the care of master's saddle- horse. Then a hoe was put into my hands, and I was soon required to do the day's work of a man; and it was not long before I could do it, at least as well as my associates in misery.

A description of the everyday life of a slave on a southern plantation illustrates the character and habits of the slave and the slaveholder, created and perpetuated by their relative position. The principal food of those upon my master's plantation consisted of corn- meal and salt herrings; to which was added in summer a little buttermilk, and the few vegetables which each might raise for himself and his family, on the little piece of ground which was assigned to him for the purpose, called a truck- patch.

In ordinary times we had two regular meals in a day: breakfast at twelve o'clock, after laboring from daylight, and supper when the work of the remainder of the day was over. In harvest season we had three. Our dress was of tow- cloth; for the children, nothing but a shirt; for the older ones a pair of pantaloons or a gown in addition, according to the sex. Besides these, in the winter a round jacket or overcoat, a wool- hat once in two or three years, for the males, and a pair of coarse shoes once a year.

We lodged in log huts, and on the bare ground. Wooden floors were an unknown luxury. In a single room were huddled, like cattle, ten or a dozen persons, men, women, and children. All ideas of refinement and decency were, of course, out of the question. We had neither bedsteads, nor furniture of any description. Our beds were collections of straw and old rags, thrown down in the corners and boxed in with boards; a single blanket the only covering. Our favourite way of sleeping, however, was on a plank, our heads raised on an old jacket and our feet toasting before the smouldering fire. The wind whistled and the rain and snow blew in through the cracks, and the damp earth soaked in the moisture till the floor was miry as a pig- sty. Such were our houses. In these wretched hovels were we penned at night, and fed by day; here were the children born and the sick- - neglected.

Source: "Uncle Tom's Story of His Life": An Autobiography of the Rev. Josiah Henson (London, 1877).